

An Unmentionable Subject

from *Coronado's Land: Daily Life in Colonial New Mexico*

by Marc Simmons

Chamber pots and privies! Were they used by the early Spaniards in the Southwest? That is a question that nearly all historians and writers have chosen to ignore. In fact, the Spanish colonists themselves in their records almost never mentioned the topic of human waste disposal.

It is, nevertheless, one of the chief factors affecting personal hygiene, for careless handling of waste can spread a variety of diseases. For centuries, Europeans were in the habit of throwing the contents of chamber pots and kitchen slop out the window, so that their streets were open sewers. Passers-by had to dodge lively to keep from being hit.

Larger cities on the continent had public latrines. Some of them extending over rivers and streams, which carried away waste. others were built upon cesspits, with the ordure periodically removed and taken to fertilize surrounding field. In Spanish municipalities, toilet facilities were reported to be the most primitive kind, there being no public sanitary arrangements. As a result the conquistadors, upon arriving in the New World, were astonished by the cleanliness of the [indigenous] towns as compared to their own.

As an example, we can take note of a remark by Pedro de Castañeda, chronicler of the Coronado Expedition. While in New Mexico, he observed that: "The [Pueblo] villages are free of nuisances because they go outside to excrete, and they pass their water into clay vessels, which they empty at a distance from the village."

Three and a half centuries later, in 1880, archaeologist-historian Adolph Bandelier found the native practice still intact. At Santo Domingo Pueblo, for instance, he noted: "On every roof there was the *tinaja* (jar) with the urine of the night, which smelt ugly. They carry it out into the fields." Among other things, his statement seems to confirm that the Pueblos recognized the value of human waste as a fertilizing agent.

And they had another use for the contents of their tinajas. Urine is a weak acid that can be mixed with indigo and other coloring to fix the dye to yarn. Like the [natives], Hispanic New Mexicans also employed urine as a mordant. Not until the Anglos introduced artificial dyes after 1850 was the practice abandoned along the upper Rio Grande.

To what degree did the colonial settlers imitate the Pueblo Indians in their careful removal of waste? We cannot be certain simply because its mention occurs only rarely in Spanish documents. The Franciscan missionaries usually had latrines within

their *conventos* (living quarters) attached to the church, but those in-house sanitary facilities are about the only ones ever noted.

At the mission of Taji que Pueblo in 1663, toilets existed in the convento and were used by the [natives] as well as the friars. At Picuris Pueblo in 1747, the convento had, says a contemporary report, “an upper room for privies, roofed, with its two-seat box.” But at Acoma, the latrine was located in a corner of the convents open courtyard and was described in 1776 by Father Francisco Dominguez as “a small recess for certain necessary business.”

How these facilities were maintained and their contents regularly emptied is left unrecorded. Possibly, as was done elsewhere, the friars dumped wood ashes in the privy holes to save as a chemical reagent. They also may have furnished the latrines with corncobs, for use in place of toilet paper, as was the custom in some parts of New Spain.

At present there is little to indicate the existence in New Mexico of free-standing privies or in-house chambers functioning as latrines much before the late nineteenth century, at least in the traditional domestic setting. Some Pueblos did not adopt the “whiteman’s privy” until after World War I.

Rural New Mexicans probably were accustomed to [relieving] themselves in the great outdoors. But like their urban neighbors, they must have owned a chamber pot (*bacin*) for use inside during cold weather. The accepted procedure was to dispose of waste from chamber pots on the nearest farmland, as the [natives] did with their tinajas.

No one has chosen to specialize in the study of Spanish chamber pots, so our knowledge of these vessels is somewhat sketchy. Wills and inventories from the Colonial Period (1598-1821) refer to pots of silver, copper, porcelain, and common clay. The wealthy classes in Mexico City occasionally obtained handsome ceramic chamber pots manufactured in Sevilla, and a few of those found their way north, possibly, to the New Mexico frontier.

One wonders how, in open country, travelers with great caravans plying El Camino Real managed to preserve their modesty when nature called. The practice of later American pioneers was learned by historian Dale L. Morgan from a Mormon lady whose grandmother went to Utah by ox train. According to what the grandmother told her many years ago, “When the trains set out, the captain immediately established this rule: women to go to this side, men to that. And on the flat and treeless plains, Mormon women solved the problem of privacy by walking out in a group, several standing with skirts spread wide to provide a screen for their sisters.”

That, concludes, Dr. Morgan, must have been the system employed in all family wagon trains going West. In all likelihood, some similar arrangement must have been adopted by the huge caravans that moved in and out of New Mexico for centuries. But we may never know the precise details since the matter was considered too indelicate by contemporaries to write about.